Framing social media communication: Investigating the effects of brand post appeals on user interaction

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**Abstract**

Social networking sites (SNS) play an increasingly important role in the mix of brands' marketing communication. A key question for marketing departments, therefore, is how brand posts can be best framed to provoke positive user reactions and interactions. In order to better understand the determinants of communication success on SNS, we propose a theoretical framework of how users process post appeals. Its logic suggests that the overall theme of a post ("post appeal") is a main antecedent of communication success. Thus, we empirically examine the effects of post appeals on user interaction by profoundly analysing a sample of 1948 Facebook posts. Results show that some post appeals have positive and others have negative impact on user interaction. Interestingly, some of the appeals with positive impact are rarely used by brands, while some of the appeals with negative impact are used quite frequently, indicating that brands currently do not grasp the full potential of post appeal strategy. This article concludes by discussing theoretical and managerial implications.

**1. Introduction**

Much of social interaction has shifted away from real-life encounters to the virtual domain, and within that domain interaction takes place more and more on social media platforms (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Naylor, Lamberton, & West, 2012). While there are many forms of social media, social networking sites (SNS), such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn, enjoy pre-eminence, as measured by the number of their users. Facebook alone, probably the most popular SNS, had (as of 2015) over 1.5 billion active users (Statista, 2015). It hardly comes as a surprise that social media has increasingly garnered the attention of marketers in all types of industries (Corstjens & Umblijrs, 2012). In fact, for most companies, social media activities already constitute a significant portion of the promotion mix (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

The increasing importance of social media has created new challenges for marketers. In particular, as Fournier and Avery (2011) have identified, there has been a change in the current power structure due to the loss of companies’ information sovereignty in the virtual world. Whereas traditional marketing communication sent one-way advertising messages to their customers, allowing them no easy way to express their reaction (and certainly no way to provide instant feedback), customers are now able — for better or for worse — to respond to marketing efforts directly and immediately (Patterson, 2012). On the one hand, the ease and speed of content distribution offered by social media can serve as a powerful tool for brands to create viral messages (Chu, 2011). On the other hand, these same features of social media can also be exploited by customers and competitors to expose and unmask crude marketing communication efforts, which can sometimes lead to so-called “online firestorms” (Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 2014). Overall, the interactivity inherent in social media platforms, and the novel communication mechanisms this interactivity has created, pose considerable challenges to marketers as they learn to adapt to the power now enjoyed by customers in the social media sphere.

The communication patterns emergent in social media and especially in social networking sites are highly complex, and a deep knowledge of their underlying mechanisms is necessary to exploit the potential of social media for marketing purposes. On Facebook, for example, companies can set up fan pages and share posts with their online community (McCorkindale, 2010). This makes it incumbent upon companies to spread persuasive messages in order to influence brand attitudes and to utilise synergies implicit in the myriad connections of social media users’ networks (Chang, Yu, & Lu, 2015). Accordingly, one of the key questions for marketers is: how can social media messages be framed to provoke positive user

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reactions and interactions?

Especially within the field of advertising, a broad body of literature has focused on message design to study communication effectiveness (e.g. Mulken, Hoots, & Nederstigt, 2014; Vakratsas & Ambler, 1999). In particular, a consensus has developed in advertising research that certain message appeals arouse attention, induce positive attitudes, and positively influence desired behavioural responses (e.g. Bulbul & Menon, 2010; Connell, 2013; Severn, Belch, & Belch, 1990). However, although certain insights of traditional advertising research can undoubtedly be transferred to a social media context, it is not certain exactly which insights are transferable, due to the significant differences between the two communication environments. In part because of this uncertainty, scholars have begun to examine social media applications closely, aiming to discover its underlying communication mechanisms. So far, though, studies on communication effectiveness in social media have mostly focused on the basic characteristics of posts, such as the presence or absence of pictures or videos (e.g. Sabate, Berbegal-Mirabent, Canabate, & Lebherz, 2014).

Building on previous findings of advertising and social media research, we argue that the overall theme of a brand post can significantly influence its popularity within the online community. In prior research, the overall theme of a message has been referred to as “appeal” (Mortimer, 2008), leading us to use the phrase “post appeal” in reference to the overall theme of a post. Especially on SNS, where brands frequently communicate with their followers, post appeals might be a central driver of user interaction (e.g. “likes”, comments, or retweets). For example, it seems plausible that posts presenting humorous content could be particularly successful since users might adopt humorous material more quickly and share it amongst themselves. On the other hand, it seems equally plausible that there are post themes that may not be appreciated by the online community, because they do not match users’ desires or information needs.

The main goal of this article is to examine the effects of SNS post appeals on user interaction, a relationship that, to our knowledge, has not yet received sufficient attention in the literature. Our study aims to make two main contributions to the literature on social media and, more broadly, on marketing communication. First, we propose a theoretical framework of how users process posts (“post processing”) on SNS. The framework integrates findings from advertising research and builds on users and gratifications theory (U&G) as well as on the elaboration likelihood model (ELM), thereby helping us better understand the determinants of communication success on SNS. We show that prior findings of social media research match the interdependencies suggested by our framework. Second, we take a further step to (partly) substantiate our proposed framework by empirically investigating the role of post appeals on communication success.

This article begins with a section on theoretical background, including a brief overview of branding in the context of SNS. After that, we propose a framework of post processing on SNS, in accordance with which antecedents of post processing are discussed. We then elaborate on the idea of message appeals and, in particular, on the idea of SNS post appeals. At the end of this section, we derive research questions, which map out a route for the empirical study. In the method section, we explain our methods of data collection, outline the coding scheme development process, and explain the coding procedure. We then present our findings, before discussing the theoretical and practical implications of our research. Finally, we suggest opportunities for future research based on the limitations of this study.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Branding, social networking sites and user interaction

The need for professional brand management to maintain a competitive edge has been widely discussed and is generally accepted in marketing literature (Aaker, 2007; Shocker, Srivastava, & Ruekert, 1994; Yoo, Donthu, & Lee, 2000). New branding possibilities have resulted from the shift of communication activities to the virtual world, and the corresponding rise in accessibility and interactivity of content (Gensler, Völckner, Lii-Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013). Now more than ever companies have the opportunity to reach out and collaborate with (potential) customers (Barwise & Meehan, 2010). Of course, companies have needed to adapt and learn how to exploit these new opportunities. Traditionally, marketers were more or less fully in control of information flow pertaining to their brand. Today, through social media, consumers can easily create and share brand information — independently of brand marketers — posing significant challenges to modern marketing communications departments (Kohli, Suri, & Kapoor, 2013).

Studies of the positive (or negative) impact on branding of users’ shared experiences are not new and are subsumed under the term “word-of-mouth” (Keller, 1993; Martilla, 1971). Recently, researchers have begun to study the phenomenon of word-of-mouth in the context of online environments (“electronic word-of-mouth”). This research has revived discussion about how marketers can utilize social media in order to exploit user-generated content for branding purposes (e.g. Dellarocas, 2003; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Halliday, 2016; Stephen & Touvia, 2010).

In response to the advent of social media marketing, companies have begun to volunteer information about their brands on SNS (Tsay, 2013). In order to reach out to SNS users, brands can create for themselves a virtual presence on a SNS. Different SNS offer different ways to go about doing this. On the microblogging site Twitter, for example, companies can set up accounts and update them with so-called “Tweets” (short messages with a maximum of 140 characters) in order to attract and inform “followers” (Hughes, Rowe, Batey, & Lee, 2012). Twitter users can follow as many accounts as they like and receive updates about followed accounts (Jin & Phua, 2014). Facebook, the most popular SNS, allows the creation of corporate brand pages (Sabate et al., 2014). On Facebook, brands can share a variety of information, such as messages, pictures, videos or links (Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012).

Although SNS differ in regard to their overall architecture, they have in common what generally drives branding success on SNS. Appealing brand pages and regularly generated brand posts are needed in order to maintain user interest and to build up long lasting relationships with (potential) customers (Baird & Parasnis, 2011). The key criterion here is user interaction. On the one hand, the intensity of user interaction with a brand post can be seen as a measure of communication effectiveness, because it indicates the popularity of that post. On the other hand, user interaction significantly determines further post distribution, which is prerequisite for branding success. Facebook, for example, measures user interaction through the number of “likes”, comments, and shares that a post receives. Based on the initial amount of user interaction, an algorithm decides how relevant a post may be to any given user and then serves the post to users deemed to be most interested, thereby determining how many brand followers will subsequently see the post in their individual Facebook “timeline” (Lipsman, Mud, Rich, & Bruich, 2012). As a consequence, a post’s intensity of initial user interaction determines its ultimate effectiveness. When a post fails
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